

Reel Talk with Film DC Interviews RIFE and Indie Capitol Awards Coordinators

Leslie Green: Welcome to Reel Talk with Film DC. This is your host, Leslie Green, Director of Communications for the DC Office of Motion Picture and Television Development, also, known as the DC Film Office.

We're sitting here today with Anthony Greene, who's also one of our Filmmakers of the Month, and Spencer Johnson. They're from the Reel Independent Film Extravaganza and the new IndieCapitol Awards.

We're so excited to have you all here with us today. Thank you for joining us.

Spencer Johnson: Thank you.

Anthony Greene: She is excited. She is smiling right now.

Leslie: [laughs] I am smiling.

Anthony: That's right.

Leslie: Anthony, glad to have you back. You were here last year talking about your Speakeasy Shorts win.

Anthony: "Going Down."

Leslie: Absolutely.

Anthony: [laughs]

Leslie: I know you've been doing the Reel Independent Film Extravaganza for some time now, and Spencer is the founder of that festival.

Can you let our listeners know a little bit about what it is and what they can expect to see this year for the upcoming festival?

Anthony: As far as what it is, Spencer started it five years ago. When I first went, I was there as an attendee, and I started working with him the next year. Spencer, you want to tell them a little bit about why you started RIFE?

Spencer: We started Reel Independent Film Extravaganza, because I saw, as a filmmaker here, that there was not enough gelling of the film community.

People knew each other. They were friendly with each other, but they didn't have a forum, where they could interact with their local peers, their national peers, and even some peers internationally.

I said, "You know what? Let's do a film festival. Robert Redford did one. He's a filmmaker. I'm a filmmaker. Let's do a film festival."

Leslie: Absolutely. Spencer, you're a physician or a psychiatrist by trade. How did you get into film-making?

Spencer: I tell everybody, "I wanted to be a movie maker since I was five and a psychiatrist since I was 15," one actually precedes the other.

They actually are not that different professions. They both involve engaging people to bring out the best they have to offer.

Leslie: Great. The films that you create, do they have a cross-section with the field that you study?

Spencer: Everybody has issues, all the characters in all the movies so far have had issues. That's a fair statement to make.

[laughter]

Spencer: They've got issues.

Leslie: Great. What makes this festival different from any of the other festivals that are here in DC?

Anthony: For RIFE and the direction that we're heading in, it seems like a lot of film festival directors, and actually, the filmmakers, are looking more for acceptance and notoriety outside of the area that they create in.

It's not just black and white. It's really grayscale. You might not get a lot of sponsorship just focusing on local filmmakers. You might not get a lot of press just focusing on local filmmakers.

I understand from a festival director's perspective why you'd look out for things from other places in the world, why you want to bring in stuff that might pique more interest. At the same time, for filmmakers, they want the world to know their films, and they want to ship stuff out instead of really cultivating the community within.

What we're trying to do and what we're really battenning down the hatches on is building this one festival with really spotlighting and uplifting the metropolitan area filmmakers' community, and then, incorporating international and national films outside of that to bookend.

This is the one festival that's really, really devoting a lot of time, paying it attention, and spotlighting and honoring filmmakers from the metropolitan area. Not only will the content get better, people will be more courageous in the content they make.

They'll feel like they have a home. They'll be able to network better, get more people on their sets that have a better pedigree. We're trying to make sure that that networking happens, that that courage happens, that confidence comes through, and we're trying to make it very inclusive for DC, Maryland and Virginia.

We are the festival that's really claiming to be the festival for DMV filmmakers, and we don't close the door on anything outside of the country or outside of the DMV area. We just concentrate more on our area and let it build that way instead.

That's the significant difference. A lot of the film festivals now, you have a lot of sponsorship, a lot of work and help coming from places outside of DC. We devoted a night to Meridian Hill Pictures with Lance Kramer. We're devoting a women's forum with Reel365 and Harbor View Filmworks. We're working with DCAPA for "A Bittersweet Monday."

We're trying our best to make sure that area filmmaking communities have a platform within our festival to really build up the area so that our filmmakers who go out and abroad have a home base that's strong and founded and that's really behind them.

Leslie: As the producer and the programmer of the festival, in addition to curating the films, having these films from DC, are you all doing workshops and perhaps training?

Is that going to be available there, too? Educational workshops, I should say.

Anthony: The one workshop that we have, we're showing "Young Oscar Micheaux" by JD Walker, who is a Howard University alum who's living in LA now.

We're going to show the short film, and then Harbor View Filmworks and Reel365.com, two companies led by women filmmakers, will hold a forum on a Saturday morning for that, just talk about women filmmaking, how it is locally, dos and don'ts, trials and tribulations.

What we want to do in the future is really start looking into doing forums, but the thing is that Jon Gann does it great. A lot of other people do it great. It's one thing that it's done great, but another thing is a lot of the local filmmakers aren't showing up to them.

I've spoken at DC Shorts forums before. It's a lot of people from Jersey that come down, and different places. I think for RIFE, what we need to do is really concentrate on getting the local films on the screen in a place where local filmmakers can grow and build audiences.

A lot of people are being swallowed online by thinking that "If I make my opus and put it on YouTube, I'll be in Hollywood in two weeks." The film model is changing so much, and actually, the business model for actually having film theaters is changing a lot.

We really want to concentrate on getting content on the screen and let the guys who are doing it good keep doing what they're doing. It's not a [inaudible 0:07:40]. I think Jon Gann is one of the smartest people in this business and in this area, and what he's doing is brilliant. Why would I get in his way?

Just like we are at the same time as the Spooky Horror Festival. CW Prather, who's a great guy, he has a great festival. Why would I program horror films? You see what I'm saying?

Leslie: Right.

Anthony: It's really about knowing what we want to do, knowing what we want to concentrate on, and sticking to that to make sure that we have our place, but we have a distinctive difference because we are the champion of the local filmmakers.

Leslie: Spencer, I heard Anthony mention RIFE. That's the acronym for Reel Independent...

Spencer: Independent Film

Leslie: ...Independent Film Extravaganza. Why did you decide to name it that? What does that mean to you? [laughs]

Anthony: I wasn't there then.

Spencer: He wasn't there, no. I like things that have extravaganza, and it's just a title.

Because down the line, it's not looking at...because festivals build. It takes a good...this is our fifth year, but we've been consistent. Some festivals happen once, and they're never heard from again.

The extravaganza part reflects as much my goal for the festival being something more than just an ordinary thing, which we've guided it in that direction. It has become that but also just to think down the line about my own long-term vision for it being something more than just the ordinary, run-of-the-mill film festival.

Leslie: Sure. The IndieCapitol Awards that are upcoming as well, this is an extension of RIFE.

Anthony: Yes, it is.

Leslie: Was that your idea, as well?

Spencer: His idea.

Leslie: Anthony's idea. What made you came up with this concept? I know we have a lot of festivals, but maybe not so much award shows.

Anthony: There are a lot of filmmakers in this area who produce quality content.

We have Rohit Rao, who did "Ultrasonic," Ron Newcomb, who did "Rise of the Fellows Hip," actually, and Erik Kristopher Myers, who did "Roulette," "Day of the Gun" from Wayne Shipley.

It's so many different filmmakers who are actually getting out there, raising the money, making these feature films, short films, documentaries, Yi Chen with "Chinatown," stuff like that, but we don't have a definitive awards ceremony here to celebrate the filmmakers from here.

IndieCapitol was originally a web series that we created about two years ago. We've had Ellie Walton, Jon Gann, Anthony Anderson, Eduardo Sánchez. We had a bunch of people on the show. They came out. They talked about their works and everything. It was hosted by Pamela Nash, directed by Sheryl Brown.

The people weren't really looking. For the most part, you get your local talent. You get them to sit down, talk about it. You post it up. It tells the truth about how far it's really spreading.

You have people who are brilliant, who have great followings, or who make pretty good films and really have something to talk about, about the industry, but for the most part, people just don't want to sit in front of their computer for 30 minutes listening to you talk about it.

We were really thinking about shutting down IndieCapitol the web series altogether and trying to figure out a different way to do it, because we still wanted to, for networking purposes, for branding purposes, spotlight independent filmmakers and keep pushing our brand out at the same time.

We were thinking about doing something with going back to print. Since everybody was going in one direction, maybe go the other direction first, and then, the idea came up.

Hollywood had a first Oscars. You don't really hear a lot about something that's made definitively for one filmmaking community to really award it for its works. Mostly, with festivals, you get Best Director, Best Picture, but you don't really get Best Original Score.

You don't get Best Set Design, Best Special Effects. It was time for us to say, "Let's jump ahead of that. It's a good idea."

"Let's do something for the metropolitan area, where we can bring DC, Maryland, and Virginia together, bring all their films together, work with the area film critics to judge these films, and solidify an awards base to keep people making films, to keep people making content, to keep people wanting to go out there and push through because they realize that somebody's paying attention."

When you have filmmakers that realize that the area is behind them, that the press is behind them, that the word's going to get out, that they can get an award for it that they can put on their poster or their submission to Netflix, and it keeps pushing and keeps pushing and keeps pushing, it brings us better content.

It brings more people into the film offices to say, "We can raise more money this time. We really shut down a bridge."

Leslie: [laughs]

Anthony: All these things can happen if the artists get more of a push.

Most artists, they just want to create something, and nothing else. They don't want to look at distribution, business models, different ways to get the film out, and getting the press involved. There's a lot of PR people around here who don't actually cover actual filmmakers, because they don't even think about it.

With something like the IndieCapitol Awards and the press that comes with something like that, getting these filmmakers on the forefront, spotlighting their achievements is something that really boosts the confidence of what people are out there doing and really showing to the press and everybody else that this community is coming together.

We're doing something about the works that we're doing, and people need to pay attention to us. Somebody might see one day that such and such won Best Picture and then go check it out.

A lot of these films are available on Netflix and stuff like that, and people aren't looking, especially, people from the area. If you hear about it through press and stuff, you end up going to check it out. What's the best way to do it than to have something like IndieCapitol Awards?

Leslie: Tell us where we can...

Anthony: That's just what I thought.

Leslie: That's just what you think, right?

Anthony: That's what I think. [laughs]

Leslie: Tell us where you can or where someone who clearly has not been to or didn't know anything about the Reel Independent Film Extravaganza or the IndieCapitol Awards...

Give us the information for that, where we can go find it, what the dates are? All of that good info.

Spencer: October 10th through 16th, reelindependentfilm.com. When you go on there, the face page, the loading page, has the RIFE events, which are at West End Cinema, and then, there's a separate tab for IndieCapitol Awards and Eventbrite. It's all set up. Tickets are available now.

Anthony: Tickets are available for weekend and week-long passes at reelindependentfilm.com through Eventbrite. The festival itself is at West End Cinema, who's affectionately run by Josh Levine for the past three years?

Spencer: Three years.

Anthony: You can buy individual tickets for the blocks through West End Cinema. We don't have special ticket prices. It's just like going to the movies.

We want you to have that experience of going to the movies, buying some popcorn, watching the movie, and enjoying yourself. We want you to have the intimate, art house theater film-going experience with these films.

For IndieCapitol Awards, it's at the Angelika Mosaic in Fairfax, Virginia. You can go through our site, reelindependentfilm.com, hit "IndieCapitol Awards," and also, through Eventbrite, to get tickets for that. The tickets for the awards ceremony are only 20 bucks.

You can buy a popcorn, drinks, and stuff, if you want. We're having a little networking party afterwards in the lounge upstairs, with an open cash bar, and then, we have a little bit of catering for that, too. Some people do awards ceremonies, and they charge you 45, 50 bucks. We know filmmakers are broke.

Leslie: [laughs]

Anthony: We get it. You don't have any money. You don't want to spend any money, because a new camera comes out every six months.

Leslie: [laughs]

Anthony: We try to keep it really feasible. We're working hand to hand with the DMV Producers Association to try to push things, and a lot of different groups. I've mentioned APAfilm.org. Their festival actually starts this weekend.

We're really cross-pollinating a lot. A lot of our stuff is with them. A lot of their stuff is with us. We're trying to work with people as much as possible. We'll have it, hopefully, in a lot of different places. You'll see some type of information about the festival and can come check out some stuff, meet some people.

Leslie: Good. It's reel, spelled R-E-E-L, right?

Anthony: Yes.

Spencer: Reel.

Leslie: Reelindependentfilm.com. I would like to close this out by really talking about some of the projects that you may be working on right now. You both are filmmakers, of course, we want to hear about some of your work, as well.

Spencer: We work together. Sky Rocket Productions, LLC.

Anthony: I work for Sky Rocket, even though, he doesn't want to say that that's what it is.

Spencer: He doesn't.

Leslie: [laughs]

Spencer: He doesn't work for Sky Rocket. He is a part-owner of Sky Rocket. We were proud to bring him on. I created Sky Rocket a decade ago, and we have completed four feature films, two of which Anthony made.

Each film gets better. Each film, we learn more. We started a distribution arm to help our peers be able to get their stuff out into the marketplace, and we won't rip them off. It's a deal where we take a cut, a minority cut, of what comes to us. We've established the partnerships out in the distribution sphere, and we're able to offer that as a service.

Four movies that are available in the marketplace. One had to be suppressed, because the money man got funny with some things. It's a long story.

[laughter]

Spencer: "Safehouse," 2009. "Coffin," 2010. "The Henchman's War," Anthony's film directorial, feature directorial debut, and then, "Thick." "Thick," we're proud to say, is out right now on Amazon.com.

I've just heard from our distributor partner it's getting up on other video-on-demand platforms. We're looking at some outlets overseas. "Thick" is what we can easily bill as the...at least, how I'm billing it, it is the world's first urban LGBT crime thriller.

Leslie: Wow. Interesting.

Spencer: It's never been done before.

[crosstalk]

Spencer: I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Leslie: I was going to ask...I noticed that one of the main characters in the film, not the main character in the film, is one of Anthony Anderson's...

Anthony: Tia Dae.

Leslie: Yes...actresses.

Anthony: Who was nominated for Best Actress for "Thick" at IndieCapitol Awards. The critics liked her.

Leslie: Great. I see a lot of cross-pollination. [laughs]

Anthony: That's the thing.

Spencer: That's the point.

Anthony: It's about vertical integration.

Spencer: That's what this was all about from the beginning. That's the extravaganza piece.

Leslie: Excellent.

Spencer: People are operating in vacuums. You can't operate in vacuums. In medicine, I can't operate in a vacuum. In the world, we can't operate as a vacuum.

Unfortunately, here in the nation's capital, it's a culture where we think everybody succeeds by making their vacuum a bigger vacuum than other people's vacuum. The whole thing, really, people succeed by cooperation and synergy. Everybody brings something to the table that everybody benefits from.

Leslie: Sure. Anthony, did you want to say anything more about the projects that you're working on right now? I know you've got your hands full with the festival.

Anthony: We've got the festival. We've got the awards show coming up. I'm writing again.

We're looking at getting back behind the camera next year and really letting everything that we put in place this year start moving forward and then start putting content in and bringing other content from outside of us into it.

We've picked up Francis Abbey's "Six Nonsmokers" to be one of the films that we distribute through Sky Rocket Productions, and it'll have its DC premiere opening night, Friday, October 10th, at the festival, with a Q&A with Francis and a couple of actors from the film.

Greg Thompson, who is one of the actors in the film, is nominated for the film as well, which is a really good thing. The thing is that it's not only bringing everyone closer. It's people's names are being able to start spread out from the news coverage from it. Promotion and marketing is one of the most important components. You can have an awful movie, and if it's on every billboard, you're going to make your money back.

It's really about promotion and marketing for these small independent films, where these folks are working nine-to-fives. Then, they want to go make a movie on the weekend, and they've got kids. They're downtrodden. They're worn out, but that bug is on that they've got to keep creating.

Something like this that gets us in the door to be able to talk to you guys, be able to get coverage in the "Post" or stuff like that, it's just positive for everybody involved. That's what we're going to keep doing, and then I'm definitely going to get back behind the camera next year...

Leslie: As you should.

Anthony: ...and do something new. Think I'm going to do "Going Down 2."

Leslie: [laughs]

Anthony: Just keep moving forward from here. That's it.

Leslie: Anthony's got jokes.

Anthony: [laughs]

Leslie: It's always a pleasure having you on the show. Thank you, Spencer, for joining us, as well.

Spencer: Thank you.

Leslie: We will absolutely continue to promote that festival.

Again, reelindependentfilm.com. This is Leslie Green signing off. You can follow us on the Web at film.dc.gov, on facebook.com/filmDC, and on Twitter, @dcfilmoffice. Catch you next time.